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ABSTRACT

Dissertations have been an important aspect of doctoral degrees for many years. However, some educators feel that dissertations are an outdated and ineffective part of the doctoral program. A study examined the role dissertations play in doctoral programs. Questionnaires sent to educational administration faculty at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, asks questions involving; (1) functions of the dissertation; (2) characteristics of the doctoral students being advised; (3) role of dissertation advisors; and (4) possible alternatives to the dissertation requirement. Questionnaires also were sent to 317 administrators of 52 institutions, all members of the University Council for Educational Administration; the response rate was 51.2 percent. Educational administration advisors ranked intense study of a narrow topic as the highest function the dissertation requirement plays in the doctoral program. Of the doctoral students, 94 percent have their master's degree. A majority of educational administration advisors view approving the dissertation topic as the key role the dissertation advisors play in the doctoral process. More than half of the dissertation advisors follow up on their students regularly. A little more than 50 percent of the Educational Administration advisors note one or more acceptable alternatives to the dissertation requirement. Includes three tables and a dissertation survey. (Contains seven references.) (KDP)

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The Dissertation Requirement for Educational Administration Programs

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There has been increasing interest in the dissertation requirement for the doctorate. Several studies on the topic have been published since William James in a 1903 essay discussed the need for flexibility in the dissertation requirement (James, 1924). The Council of Graduate Deans (1991) issued a policy statement noting that the dissertation requirement is an important capstone to the doctoral degree. However, the report suggested better advising, shorter dissertations, and clearer policy guidelines for students. Bowen and Rudenstine (1992) in an extensive study of graduate programs reiterated some of the findings of the Council of Graduate Deans. In addition they noted some disturbing findings that the percentage of students who never earn Ph.D.'s, in spite of having achieved ABD status, has risen in both larger and smaller programs, as has the time spent at the dissertation stage by those who completed doctorates. We suspect the same situation is true in respect to Ed.D.'s.

Solomon and Solomon (1993) criticized the dissertation requirement for the terminal degree. They note that in general the dissertation contribution is minimal and the effort monumental:

Success in most academic fields is determined by articles and scholarly publications, not tiresome reviews of the literature and three hundred page monstrosities... If what is intended is a bibliographical survey of the literature, why not just require that? Or a few substantial papers. Why encourage what looks like a life's work to please a picky committee of four? (p.108).

Murphy and Hallinger (1987) criticized the university model for training administrators and recommended bringing the process more in line with workplace conditions.

It is not surprising that a model of training which promulgates ideas often judged to be impractical and unconnected to the realities of the workplace, that neglects to provide guidance in managing technical core operations, and that often fosters the perception of professional impotence should come under attack by school administrators. What is surprising is that it took so long for alternatives to the university-based monopoly to gain a foothold. (p.252).

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Murphy (1992) suggested reframing the education of school administrators to prepare leaders for tomorrow's schools. He suggests that preparation programs for administrator practitioners should be different from those designed to produce professors of educational administration. He suggests the development of alternative programs for educational administration.

Van Patten, Denny, and Bolding (1993) completed a survey of dissertation advisors recommended by graduate deans in major research universities. Findings indicated general satisfaction with the dissertation requirement with significant concerns about length of time to complete the project, need for improved advisement, and a need to shorten the length of the thesis. Individual open-ended responses indicated some desire to explore substitutes for the dissertation requirement but due to strict traditional requirements of graduate school deans such change would not come easily.

These studies all point to a need to evaluate more fully the dissertation requirement for the doctorate. Of special concern are possible alternatives for the requirement particularly for practitioner fields such as educational administration. The problem for this study was to determine the role and function of the dissertation requirement, as perceived by educational administration advisors.

Current Perceptions of the Dissertation Requirement

The dissertation remains a capstone requirement for the doctoral degree in the majority of American Higher Education Institutions. To study the present role and function of the dissertation requirement for educational administrators a questionnaire was developed. It was piloted for readability and applicability of content by Educational Administration Faculty at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville (Appendix A). The questionnaire surveyed dissertation advisors about (a) functions they saw the dissertation serving in the doctoral program, (b) the doctoral students they advised, (c) their role as a dissertation advisor, and (d) the acceptability of alternatives to the dissertation requirement.

Methods:

Respondents were selected in a two-phase process. First, requests were sent to University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) listed educational administration department chairs inviting participation in the study. Secondly, on receipt of their consent six questionnaires were

mailed to each chair of educational administration departments and to members of the executive committee of UCEA. Department chairs then distributed their questionnaires to members of their department heavily engaged in dissertation advisement. A total of 317 questionnaires were sent to 52 member institutions identified in the UCEA 1991-1992. Five additional questionnaires were sent to members of the executive committee.

Results

There were 169 usable responses from 317 mailed surveys, a response rate of 51.2% percent.

Functions the Dissertation Serves

Faculty advisors were presented with a list of 13 functions that a dissertation might serve in a student's graduate program, and asked to rate how well the dissertation served each function. Respondents rated items on a scale ranging from 0 = "not well at all" to 4 = "extremely well".

Educational Administration advisors rated highest (a) intense study of a narrow topic, (b) knowledge of the literature in the field, and (c) an exercise in intellectual discipline. The advisors gave the lowest rating to the dissertation functioning as an original contribution to the field. Table 1 lists all items and their mean ranking.

Insert Table 1 about here

Another item asked whether a Ed.D. degree should emphasize theory, application or a combination of the two. Over 65% of the educational administrators responded that the degree program should stress application.

Doctoral Students

Advisors were asked how long they anticipated it would take for entering doctoral students to complete their programs. Responses indicated the range was from 2-5 years to complete the doctorate. Educational administration advisors noted that over 94% of students entering the doctoral programs had a master's degree.

The professors were also asked about the types of employment their advisees entered after graduation. Table 2 presents the mean percentage

responses for each employment setting. Responses from educational administration advisors indicated that nearly three-fourths of their students enter the field of administration.

Insert Table 2 about here

Role of the Dissertation Advisor

Advisors were asked the extent to which they typically participated in dissertation topic selection: not at all, approve the topic, or select a topic. Almost all respondents (97%) indicated advisors approved the topic.

Dissertation advisors were also asked the extent to which they followed up and encouraged completion of students who failed to persist in the program. Although there is variation at the individual level, 55% of the educational administrators reported following up with their advisees regularly and 32% occasionally.

Of the 169 responding educational administration advisors, 142 (84%) reported they were able to incorporate their advisees dissertation research into their own work. A majority (72%) of the educational administrator advisors reported they gave papers with their advisees at professional meetings.

Educational administrator advisors reported a career advisement load ranging from 20 to over 100 with a median of 28. Full professors with extended tenure in the field reported chairing from 50 to over 200 dissertations. One respondent said he lost count at 100.

Possible Substitutes for the Dissertation Requirement

The survey participants were presented with alternatives to the dissertation requirement, and were asked whether each was an acceptable substitute. Table 3 lists these alternatives and the number of professors who saw each alternative as a possible substitute for the dissertation requirement.

Insert Table 3 about here

Just over half (51.5%) of the educational administration respondents identified one or more acceptable alternatives to the dissertation, but no single alternative was acceptable to a majority of respondents.

Further Comments

Space was also provided for survey respondents to comment further about possible substitutions or modifications in the doctoral dissertation requirement. Only 23% of the educational administrator advisors wrote comments. These comments were judged to fit into three broad categories:

1. Satisfaction with the current dissertation requirement.

- * A dissertation is one requirement that separates doctoral work from all other degrees.
- * We need the dissertation to assure quality.
- * Without a dissertation, why have a degree?
- * Dissertations need to be theoretically based but driven by the problems of practice and policy.
- * Alternatives to the dissertation for a doctoral degree may be useful but would probably devalue the degree. Stay with the dissertation. We need a dissertation for quality. For the Ph.D. a dissertation is absolutely essential.
- * The quality of the dissertation in Educational Administration is uneven, but substituting other activities will not of itself raise the intellectual level of the graduate school experience. Losing the standardization of training fostered by the dissertation will probably erode what intellectual usefulness the doctoral process has. Graduates of the program will be increasingly inclined to say that the degree is no substitute for experiences and they will be right.

2. More flexibility is needed in the dissertation requirement.

- * This is an important issue for Educational Administration. Several prestigious doctoral professions don't require a concluding project (i.e., dissertation) - notably medicine and law. We seem caught in this issue with no firm resolve to do good research or to eliminate traditional dissertations. Possible exploration of internships, apprenticeships.

- * The structure of the dissertation manuscript should be more adaptable for publication/presentation at conferences.
- * Quantitative research has been the paradigm, but there are lots of possibilities in good qualitative studies.
- * We are looking at using field investigation for the Ed.D. We have incorporated part of the portfolio concept in the doctoral program but not to substitute for the dissertation.
- * I am in favor of substitutions but we can't do it at [our institution] without Graduate School approval. It will not be forthcoming because substitution for the dissertation would be seen as a lowering of standards.
- * Our Ed.D. program has been re-designed to have a much stronger applied approach. See chapter in Joe Murphy's new book on *Alternative Preparation Programs*, 1993.
- * There should be variations on acquiring an Ed.D. or Ph.D. 1) Traditional - qualitative or quantitative 2) Conceptual synthesis/ critical review/ questions posed. 3) Reflective essay 4) Expressive interpretation. We are at the front end of a major shift toward an accumulated/documented portfolio approach. Given that most of our doctoral students return to their fields as practitioners, this seems to be more appropriate and helpful to them.

3. *Miscellaneous comments.*

- * We are considering some changes to the Ed.D. dissertation, substituting a descriptive study, an evaluation, a program development activity - only proposed, not yet enacted.
- * Quality! Quality! Quality! Let's not let others define Quality. The profession of educational administration should define Quality.
- * There is a need for more case studies and historical studies.

Conclusions

The responding educational administrator advisors were more oriented toward a practitioner focus with some indication substitutes for the dissertation in the field would be worth exploring. Chief concerns were with quality of the doctoral program and with the traditional focus of graduate deans who would not be likely to approve innovative doctoral programs that provide substitutes for the dissertation requirement.

Educational administration is a practitioner oriented field. Educational administrators view the dissertation as a requirement to develop scholarly attitudes. Educational administrators do not view the dissertation as an original contribution. In their view the dissertation functions best for an intense study of a narrow topic and for knowledge of the literature in the field.

Most dissertation advisors either were able to incorporate their advisees dissertation research into their own work, or have given papers with their advisees at professional meetings. These responses suggest that dissertation advisors, often pressured to publish and engage in research, may have a vested interest in stressing the dissertation as a capstone to the doctoral program.

Educational administration advisors carry a much heavier load than university wide advisors. The longer an Educational Administrator faculty member remains with an institution the larger his advisement load. Some reported in excess of 150 advisees during their career tenure.

Most doctoral candidates in the field, well over 70%, are on leave from administrative positions during their program and remain in the same position after completing the degree program.

Some administration advisors indicated change in the dissertation requirement would be appropriate and desirable but might have an effect of diminishing the quality of their programs.

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Table 1
How Well the Dissertation Serves Selected Functions

Function	0 = Not well at all 4 = Extremely well	Mean	Rank Order
Intense study of a narrow topic		3.41	1
Knowledge of literature in the field		3.38	2
An exercise in intellectual discipline		3.28	3
Development of research skills		3.23	4
Development of scholarly writing		3.22	5
Empirical research		2.84	6
Scholarly achievement		2.79	7
Expository presentation		2.65	8
Identifying the student as specialist		2.57	9
Theoretical discourse		2.55	10
Collaboration with experienced researchers		2.41	11
Historical research		2.16	12
Original contribution		2.14	13

Table 2
Where Doctoral Graduates Obtain Employment

Employment setting	Mean percentage reported by educational administration advisors
Administration	71.5
College teaching	12.0
Other teaching	6.9
Government positions	5.6
Business/industry	2.3
Full-time research	1.7
Other (e.g. professional practice)	0.0
	100.0%

Table 3
Acceptability of Alternatives to the Dissertation Requirement

Dissertation Alternative	Frequency of Response
Development of an innovative project - advance a field of knowledge	38.7%
Creating a demonstration project	33.3
Publication of at least three articles in refereed journals	20.0
Additional coursework in fields recommended by the advisor and doctoral committee.	1.2
Extended Supervised Practicum	3.0
Two or more of the above	28.2

Note: Respondents could select more than one alternative.

Dissertation Survey
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville
Fall 1992

Please circle or fill in your response.

- I. These are some functions that a dissertation might serve in a student's graduate program. Indicate how well a dissertation serves each function.

	Not well at all			Extremely well	
a. Intense study of a narrow topic	0	1	2	3	4
b. Development of research skills	0	1	2	3	4
c. Development of scholarly writing	0	1	2	3	4
d. Knowledge of literature in the field	0	1	2	3	4
e. Identifying the student as a specialist	0	1	2	3	4
f. Collaboration with experienced researchers	0	1	2	3	4
g. Original contribution to the body of professional literature	0	1	2	3	4
h. Scholarly achievement	0	1	2	3	4
i. An exercise in intellectual discipline	0	1	2	3	4
j. Historical research	0	1	2	3	4
k. Theoretical discourse	0	1	2	3	4
l. Expository presentation	0	1	2	3	4
m. Empirical research	0	1	2	3	4

Please see other side

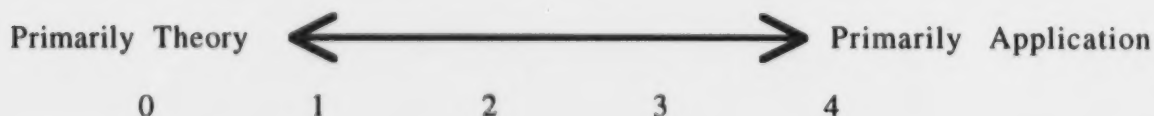


II. Please answer the following relating to your role as a dissertation advisor.

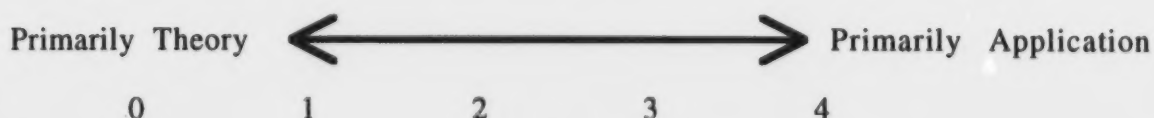
1. When doctoral students enter your program, how long do you anticipate it will take them to complete their program? _____
2. Approximately what percentage of your doctoral students enter the program with a masters degree? _____%
3. At the completion of the dissertation do you require:
 - a) A presentation? Yes No
 - b) An oral defense? Yes No
4. To what extent does the dissertation advisor typically participate in the topic selection?
 - a. Not at all b. Approves the topic c. Selects a topic
5. If a student fails to persist in the program, to what extent do you follow up and encourage completion?
 - a. Not at all b. Occasionally c. Consistently
6. What percentage of doctoral graduates from your program enter each of the following?

Governmental positions	_____%	College teaching	_____%
Business/Industry	_____%	Other teaching	_____%
Full time research	_____%	Administration	_____%

7a. What should a Ph.D. degree emphasize?



7b. What should an Ed.D. degree emphasize?



8. In your opinion, how valuable is dissertation research in effecting change in your discipline?
- 9a. Do dissertation advisors receive reduction of workload for their advising in your college? If so, how much?
- 9b. Is there a limit on new advisees per faculty member in your program? If so, how many?
- 9c. Does your program offer the (*Please circle one*): Ed.D. Ph.D. Both
10. Would any of the following be acceptable alternatives for the dissertation requirement?
- | | | |
|---|-----|----|
| a. Extended supervised practicum | Yes | No |
| b. Creating and implementing a demonstration project in the field | Yes | No |
| c. Innovative project leading to improved delivery of educational services | Yes | No |
| d. Publications of three articles in refereed journals. | Yes | No |
| e. Eighteen hours of additional coursework | Yes | No |
| f. Portfolio assessment combining two or more of the above. Which ones? (a b c d e) | Yes | No |
| g. Other, identify: | | |



11. What is your academic rank?
12. Approximately how many dissertations have you advised?
13. Are you able to incorporate your advisees' dissertation research into your own professional contribution to the field?
14. Have you given papers with your advisees at professional meetings?
15. Thank you for your contribution to this study. Space is available for any further comment about possible substitutions or modifications in the doctoral dissertation requirement.

If you would like a copy of the survey results please write your mailing address in the area below.